Case Study: The Price of a Degree

Cassington College is in serious debt. It is a high-quality, small college. Like many other small colleges, it has had difficulty keeping up with inflation. It needs to increase its funding substantially in order to avoid massive layoffs of faculty and staff – and even a complete closing of the college. However, it will lose students if it raises tuition or cuts back on scholarships. As a private college, it cannot receive support from the state in which it resides. Though the college has done all it can to raise funds from alumni and other sources, not enough can be raised to solve the problem. The college is a major employer in the region. If it closes its doors, the community will be economically devastated.

College President William Winston has recently been offered an unusual opportunity. He was approached by a wealthy alumnus, Mr. A. Fluent, who is eager to make a generous, anonymous gift to the college. But there is a catch. Mr. Fluent’s son, Edward, has failed out of two colleges already. Edward tries hard, but he clearly does not have the ability to do college-level work, even with professional tutoring. Cassington College’s academic standards are quite high, which is why Edward did not apply there earlier. When Edward’s recent application to Cassington was turned down, Mr. Fluent decided to intervene, making the following offer to President Winston, “I would like Edward to be admitted to Cassington and receive his degree within four years. I’ll donate $1,000,000 right away if you admit him. As long as he makes satisfactory progress, I’ll donate an additional $1,000,000 at the end of each year. When he receives his degree, I’ll throw in another $2,000,000. So, all you have to do for $7,000,000 is to make sure Edward gets through.” Mr. Fluent has made it clear that he is offering to pay the college to give his son Edward a degree that he will not be able to earn through his own academic efforts.

Winston discusses the proposal confidentially with his good friend, Derek York, Director of Admissions. York advises, “Go for it. You have to be practical about these things. Seven million dollars will pay a lot of salaries and provide a lot of scholarships for bright and deserving students. So we let one not-so-bright one through. That’s a small price to pay to save a lot of jobs and raise the academic level of the institution. Besides, don’t some of the big-time athletic programs at other colleges bend the rules to get some of their athletes through? What’s the difference?”

Now, Winston has called a special session of the board of trustees. After telling the board members that what he is about to say is strictly confidential, he shares the proposal with them, seeking their advice.

Imagine that you are a member of the board and must advise President Winston on the morally right course of action. For this assignment you have only two options available to you: (1) accept the bribe and grant Edward a degree he did not earn, or (2) reject the bribe and the college will close. No other options are available to you for the purposes of this assignment. See the Discussion Forum instructions in the appropriate learning unit in MyHills for further details on how to complete this assignment.

© David Massey and Indian Hills Community College

This case study is adapted from Communication Ethics: Methods of Analysis, (Wadsworth, 1994), by James Jaska and Michael Pritchard and has been edited for class use by David Massey, Indian Hills Community College. The case is presented as a basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of the situation.